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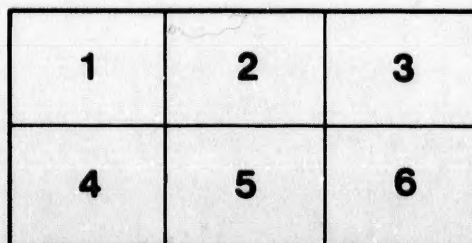
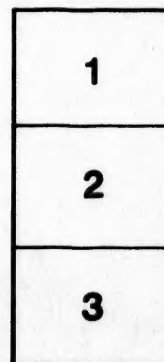
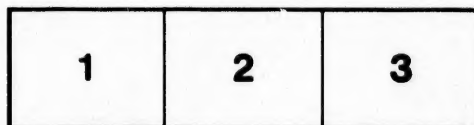
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SPEECH

OF

HON. SAMUEL GORDON, OF NEW YORK,

ON

THE OREGON QUESTION.

DELIVERED

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 14, 1846.

WASHINGTON:

BLAIR & RIVES, PRINTERS.

1846.

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THE OREGON QUESTION.

The resolution from the Committee on Foreign Affairs, requiring the President to notify Great Britain of the intention of the United States to terminate the joint occupancy of Oregon, and to abrogate the convention of 1827, being under consideration in Committee of the Whole—

Mr. GORDON obtained the floor, and said that, at this late and protracted stage of the debate, his disposition to take part in it was much less than it had been at its commencement. Indeed, so much had been said, in such a variety of forms—from the grave to the gay, and from the sublime to the ridiculous—that it was almost impossible to say anything new, or anything old in a new form. Still, having manifested quite an early disposition to address the committee, he had a few words to say. He had a vote to give, and reasons to assign for that vote, for which he alone was responsible.

The President of the United States (continued Mr. G.) has recommended to Congress the termination of the joint convention of 1827, by the giving of the twelve months' notice provided for by that convention; and, in order to justify that recommendation, he has stated his reasons for it. He has informed us of the offer of compromise made to the British Government, through her Minister resident here; and he has also reviewed the whole history of the negotiation, from the year 1818 down to the date of his Message; and the question now is, shall Congress adopt the recommendation of the President? Shall we direct that notice to be given which he believes necessary to be given, to secure the rights of the United States in the Oregon Territory? Or shall we decline, and refuse to execute and carry out the recommendation of the President, and present to the civilized world the spectacle of a great nation divided in its councils—divided not only among ourselves into parties, but even the Democratic party split up into factions on so great and grave a subject?

I will not discuss our title to Oregon. That duty belonged to another department of this Government, and most ably was it performed. Our minister in the late negotiation exhibited our claim in the clearest and strongest light. No one, however able, can do it better; and whoever shall attempt to fortify his positions will utterly fail, and only weaken and obscure that which now is so plain that he who runs may read and understand. I would not add or alter a syllable. He is entitled to our respect for the great ability with which he

conducted the argument, and the skill and power with which he brushed away the cloud of mist in which previous negotiation had seemingly involved our rights.

Gentlemen say that the notice is cause and ground of war, and that we are not prepared for war. I deny that the giving this notice is either a just cause of war, or any ground whatsoever of war. It is provided for in the convention itself. We have the same right to give the notice to terminate that convention that Great Britain herself has; and who will dare to say, here or elsewhere, in solemn and serious argument, that if Great Britain gives us notice, we have a right to declare war against that Power for the adoption of a measure provided for in the very treaty now under consideration? Sir, it is not this notice which would lead to war, or that would be the cause of war. If war is to grow out of this controversy in the Oregon Territory, it will come of those measures which everybody avows himself ready to go for; which measures, in that distant region, would bring British subjects into conflict with American citizens, and the American Government with the British Government. This it is that will enkindle the flame of war, if war is to grow out of the controversy between these two Powers.

Gentlemen have painted the horrors of war in the most vivid colors and the most haggard features. But what have we ever lost by war that we should disparage it? Nothing. On the contrary, we have gained everything by it. For what we are, and what we possess, we are indebted to war. The old French war nursed in its tent the young Hercules of America, and trained him up for the Revolution—a general the bravest of the brave, whose fame as a warrior outshines that of Alexander, Cæsar, or Napoleon. His deeds in arms are the pride and boast and honor of the great nation he founded. The revolutionary war resulted in the establishment of these United States. The last war with Great Britain gave the freedom of the seas to the commerce of the world. The next war with that power will expel her from this continent. Though a peace-loving people, we are, when aroused in defensive war, the most warlike race ever clad in armor. Let war come, if it will come; boldly and firmly we will meet its shock, and roll back its wave on the "fast-anchored isle of Britain," and dash its furious flood over those who raised the storm: but could not direct its course.

Ours is the last people, in a craven spirit, to beg for peace. In a just war, as this would be, on our part, the sound of the clarion would be the sweetest music that could greet our ears. It will not do to attempt to intimidate the citizen soldiers of this great Republic with threats of aggressive war, if you mean to preserve the peace of nations.

Should war be declared, New York would not be absent at the call of the roll. Her position, commercial and geographical, is such that she must sustain the brunt. From that responsibility she would not shrink, but freely and fearlessly assume it. She prefers peace to war, but war to dishonor. But, sir, there will be no war—there will be no war, because our rights are paramount to Great Britain's, and because Great Britain is aware of our determination, our valor, and our resources.

The growing disposition of England for free trade is favorable to peace. With the annexation of Texas we own nearly all the cotton lands in the world. She is dependant on us for cotton. One week's supply of cotton wanting in the factories of England, places the country on the verge of a revolution. The powerful bankers, the princely merchants, and the cotton lords, backed by the middling classes, whose daily gains depend on the prevalence of peace, are too strong for the English oligarchy to resist. The salvation of England depends upon uninterrupted relations in commerce with the United States. The maintenance of these relations is of great importance to the United States; but it is not vitally so. The United States could stand the shock of a rupture, but England would crumble under it. The United States, as the great cotton grower of the world, possesses a vast power. It is understood and felt by the civilized world. With this power they control the commercial world, and by this power they can command peace, at least for themselves. She therefore desires no war. She would hesitate long before she would declare war, even if her rights were invaded by the United States. The income tax, imposed to pay the interest on her vast national debt, is the last resource of revenue. Everything else had been taxed to the utmost. She would have to resort to forced loans for the means of war. She is not only dependant on us for cotton, but we are her best customer, at least would be, under a judicious and reciprocal adjustment of the respective tariffs of the two countries, by which our breadstuffs and agricultural products would enter her ports, and her manufactures ours in exchange. We, however, can live without her, tariff or no tariff, peace or war; but she cannot exist without us in relations of peace and commerce. We have the resources and internal trade of a continent. She is limited to a small island, and her famishing millions live from hand to mouth, dependant on the cotton trade. Stop their looms, and you stop their daily bread. War with the United States would be the most suicidal policy she could pursue; and she is not so blind as not to see it. The whole of Oregon is of vastly less importance to her than a year's supply of raw cotton. The habits and business of her people are deeply and vitally identified with the manufacture of cotton, and the cotton-goods market of the world. Our breadstuffs are becoming quite important to her. Hence there will be no war declared by Great Britain for this territory, even if we should take

all east of the Russian line, and west of the Rocky mountains, up to the polar ocean. But we want only what belongs to us by clear unquestionable title, and that we will have. The United States have to do to preserve peace, to uphold their rights, and carry out the grand doctrine, that no part of the continent of North America, at least, is open to further colonization or settlement by any foreign or monarchical government.

But it is said we are not prepared for war. We are as much prepared as we ever were, or I trust, we ever shall be, in time of peace. We are as much prepared now as we were when Revolution broke out; we are as much prepared now as we were when Great Britain was last declared. If love of country and a devotion to republican institutions—if the right of citizens to be arms in time of peace—is preparation for war, then we are prepared. We have more than two millions of fighting men, with arms in their hands, and have eighteen millions of people, ready and able to feed and clothe and sustain them in the conflict. We have all the raw *matériel* of war; we have the requisite skill, capital, and machinery to make that *matériel* useful, and to convert it into instruments of defence. We are prepared for war—not, to be sure, by a large expensive navy, nor by a standing army. It is not our policy to suckle armies a dry-nurse the land; and until I shall be satisfied that war is to come, and that we are to have an aggressive war by Great Britain, I shall not be prepared much to enlarge either the army or the navy. I repeat, then, we are as much prepared for war to-day as we ever shall be, or ever ought to be, in time of peace. I would rather lose battles during the first year of a war than I would consent, in time of peace, to build up a large and expensive navy, or to establish a standing army, when we might come. The cost of the army and the navy, the injury to our free institutions, would be greater far than any declaration of war, coming unexpected upon us, even though for the first year we might suffer defeat. But, sir, I repeat, we are ready; we have two millions of brave men, ready at the call of their country to march to the front of the battle whenever and wherever the cloud of war might lower.

In order to ascertain whether this notice should be given or not, it is necessary to understand what are the rights of Great Britain, and what the rights of the United States, under this joint convention of 1818, indefinitely continued by the convention of 1827. By this convention it was provided that the citizens, subjects, and vessels of Great Britain and the United States should be free to enter the territory, its bays, harbors, creeks, and rivers, the right to trade with the natives. There is no power given to Great Britain to exercise sovereign acts of authority; but under this treaty, which gave certain privileges to British subjects, but none to the British Government, what has that Government done? In the first place, she has incorporated the Hudson Bay Company—a second East India Company—and she has given to it the monopoly of the whole trade of this Northwestern territory—thus denying to her own subjects those very rights and privileges which were ceded to them by this convention. She has gone on, in violation and in defiance of this treaty, to establish courts of civil and

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criminal jurisdiction, to build her forts in every section, and to establish a military government over the entire territory. The Government of Great Britain is at this moment firmly established in all that territory. Under this joint treaty, which gave to her subjects certain trading privileges, of which she has deprived them, and conferred upon a corporation, Great Britain has gone on to establish a government—military, civil, and political. Her flag is erected on every fort—numbering some thirty—and she is now, by her flag, proclaiming her right of dominion over this territory. And what, in the mean time, have we done? Nothing. While we have been sleeping, under the influence of this “masterly inactivity,” she, step by step, has been encroaching upon this territory, and claiming it as her own. Whilst we have had scruples about this treaty, she has violated it at every point; and instead of suffering her subjects to go there and trade, she, under the pretence of taking care of them, and keeping in check the savage Indian tribes, has established a government there as complete and as perfect as that existing under the East India Company charter. It may be said that this government is necessary to control these Indian tribes, to regulate trade, and to protect her own subjects. If, in connection with these acts of sovereign power, she had not claimed the territory itself, there might be some pretext for the argument. But the *quo animo* of these acts had been made manifest by her claim to the territory itself. She has exercised the highest sovereign power, and, at the same time, has claimed the territory and the soil, and refuses to acknowledge our rights within it.

I believe that no gentleman who has spoken in this House, nor any one out of it, has pretended that we are to surrender any territory south of 49°. And yet, unless we give this notice, and extend our laws and jurisdiction over this territory, all the territory south of 49°, and north and west of the Columbia river, is as certain to fall into the hands of Great Britain, as it is certain that she is now there asserting her claim. Until the notice is given, and suitable measures are adopted for their protection, I will venture to say that no American citizen will undertake to settle north of the Columbia. The territory north of the Columbia has been occupied by British forts, and settlements, and subjects; and not an American citizen has gone, or will dare to go, north of the Columbia for settlement. Whether they are to be bought up, or tomahawked, or to have the Indians set upon them, is immaterial. Go there they will not, until such time as this Government shall assert its just rights, and show the people there that they are to be protected by all its power, under the just claim which we possess.

What will be the effect of continuing this convention? It will give all this territory south of 49° and north and west of the Columbia river, to Great Britain; and this is what is called “masterly inactivity.” Oregon on time! the South Carolina policy! which would to-morrow fiercely wage war against the world for the conquest of Cuba or California, (I will not say Mexico, because I do not believe she wants it,) but would rather that the whole of Oregon down to 42° should belong to Great Britain than to the United States. Yes, sir; this is the South Carolina policy!—a policy identi-

cal, in regard to that territory, with the British policy itself.

Great Britain has numerous forts south of 49°, or in that part of the territory which lies north of the Columbia; and she even has one fort two hundred miles south of the Columbia river—Fort Umqua. Are gentlemen prepared to give up this territory south of 49°? Gentlemen say this subject should be left in the hands of the President—that it is an executive concern. But, sir, the giving this notice will not take from the Executive department of the Government its proper, independent jurisdiction. That will remain where it is, in *statu quo*. Whether any treaty is to be ratified between this Government and Great Britain, or whether any offers are to be made on the part of Great Britain, I know not, nor will I interfere with that question. I will not inquire, nor anticipate what offer the Executive would receive, or Great Britain make. But if any offer should be made, I trust that the Executive will ratify no treaty that would not receive the sanction of the nation, and accord with the just rights of our people. I am willing to leave that matter in the hands of the Executive, where this notice would leave it, where it now is, and with which we cannot interfere.

Great Britain has manifested a disposition to contend not only for the territory north of forty-nine degrees, but for that north of the Columbia river. And if we are to contend for any part of this territory, we may as well, if the conflict is to come, contend for that north of forty-nine degrees as for that between forty-nine degrees and the Columbia.

I believe our title to the whole of Oregon up to 54° 40' is “clear and unquestionable;” and that below 49°, under no circumstances, is an inch of this territory to be surrendered to the British Government. Whether the territory north of 49° and south of 54° 40' is a matter of compromise, negotiation, and settlement between the two Governments, I will not now undertake to say. It is sufficient for me to repeat the expression of my belief that our title up to 54° 40' is “clear and unquestionable.”

Much has been said about the power of Great Britain, and the danger of entering upon a war with her; that we must forego our treaty rights, because she is a powerful and a dangerous foe; that her colonies and her possessions encircle the world from north to south, from east to west; and that this would be no little war, but a contest between systems—a long, protracted, arduous, and bloody war. Now, if Great Britain encircles the world with her possessions, it only argues her weakness, not her strength. She has to maintain large armies in the East Indies, and a military force in Canada. In all her settlements, it is necessary for her to maintain a military establishment; and, therefore, I say that her extended colonies, her vast power in that respect, is, in fact, only her weakness. And if a declaration of war should come—and if it comes at all, it must be from her and not from us—it will be the signal of her dissolution. Her restless colonies would then have an opportunity to strike a blow; and at this moment she is weaker than she ever was at any time since she became mistress of the seas. The defeat of her aggressive attack upon the Chinese would have proved her downfall. Let her once

become engaged in war, and let Canada or Ireland evince a disposition to regain their lost independence, and the British empire will be at an end. She knows it. She is less ready to go to war, and less able to maintain a war, either offensive or defensive, than either France, Russia, or the United States. She has too many colonies. They require armies and navies to keep them in subjection. She wants more concentrated power. The extended campaigns and the numerous conquests of Napoleon consigned him to banishment at St. Helena; and the extensive conquests of Great Britain will be her grave.

I do not know that I shall dread the conflict, if it come; and I venture to say that Great Britain dreads it more than the United States. Sir Robert Peel, indeed, in a speech made in the British Parliament responsive to the Inaugural Address of the President, blustered about war; but it was intended to operate on the weak nerves of the American people and Government. He had tried this course of action in the case of McLeod, when other men were at the helm of this Government; and he had found that bluster and bravado had had their effect upon the men then in power. The British Government was now resorting to the same means of intimidation; but, thank God, they had to deal with different agents on the part of this people.

I have no prejudice against the British—I mean against the British people. I admire them; I admire those who toil in her work-shops and her fields of agriculture; nay, if you please, I admire her armies and her navy. I like them for their bravery—for their love of liberty—their virtue—their industry. Why should I not? They are blood of our blood, bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh; we speak the same language; we are descended from the same common ancestry. But I must hold them, as I hold the rest of the world, "Friends in peace, enemies in war." But I draw a distinction between the British people and the British Government. I abhor and detest the British Government. Would to God that the British people—the Irish, Scotch, Welch, and English—would rise up in rebellion, sponge out the national debt, confiscate the land, and divide it among the people. Never, in the world, will they reach the promised land of equal rights except through this Red sea of blood. Let Great Britain declare war, and I fervently hope that the British people—at least the Irish—will seize the occasion to rise and assert their independence.

Such are my sentiments in relation to the British Government and the British people. In a controversy between France and Great Britain, or Russia and Great Britain, I would rather that the British Government should triumph than that she should fall; I would rather see the British people the subjects of the British Government than the subjects of France or the serfs of Russia. I believe they are better off under the British Government than they would be under a foreign yoke; but I again repeat that I abhor that Government; I abhor that purse-proud and pampered aristocracy, with its bloated pension list, which, for centuries past, has wrung its being from the toil, the sweat, and the blood of that people. This was the sentiment of the illustrious Emmet, when, on his trial, he declared "if the French came as invaders, he would meet them on the beach with a sword in

'one hand and a torch in the other; he would raze every house, and burn every blade of grass, and the last intrenchment of freedom should be his grave.'

We should have no controversy with the British people, separate and apart from the aggressive and hostile action of their Government, and we should have and express no prejudice against them simply because they are Englishmen, or subjects of the British Government. It is not their fault that they are its subjects. They were born in allegiance to it, and are kept under by military force, and the power of wealth. For the Government, as it exists and exercises its functions, we have, and can have, no respect whatever. If we manifest the feeling we ought to possess towards them, they would have no special hatred towards us; and even in a war between the two Powers, one of the great obstacles to her vigorous prosecution of it would be the indisposition, if not the absolute repugnance, of our transatlantic brethren to fight us and spill fraternal blood, in a contest in which our Government would be in the right, and theirs in the wrong. The colonists in the Revolution had fearless defenders, even in Parliament; and the mass of the British people were not half so inimical to us as the king, his ministers, and the nobility. Much of their prejudice is artfully engendered by the machinations of the nobility, to keep out of the minds of the people an infusion of the leaven of Democracy. We should have the sagacity to see, and the wit to counteract it, and not play into the hands of the enemies of self-government, in that respect, by an unnecessary exhibition of senseless spleen. Not that we should have cause to dread them, one and all, though actuated by the bitterest animosity. But their good opinion is just as well as their ill will, and quite as cheaply purchased. In this friendly relation of good opinion, natural to a common ancestry, language, and religion, I would place, as well the inhabitants of the island of Great Britain itself, as of all her colonies and dependencies, near and remote.

Our sympathies for the oppressed of all nations are so strong that we open our country to them as an asylum. Our naturalization laws are extremely lenient; and the shortness of the term of probation, before aliens can become citizens of the United States, is a proof of our friendship for every white man under the light of heaven, and not less for Englishmen than Frenchmen, Germans, or any other class of the human family.

Should Canada, Ireland, or other portion of the British empire strike for liberty, our sympathies would be sure to be enlisted on their side, and our most fervent prayers would ascend to heaven for their safe deliverance from the galling chains of feudal bondage and military oppression. I would not guaranty that directly or indirectly our people, in the struggle, would not give them more substantial aid and comfort than mere prayers and sympathy. Our controversy, then, if controversy we have, is with the Government *per se*, and not its subjects any farther than they are connected with the Government in the contest; and let them so understand it. Should a hostile army invade the enemy's country, it would be a stroke of policy in the commanding general to promise and give protection to the people of the invaded district who would join his standard, or not oppose his march,

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It is no less wise in us to conciliate the good will of the British people, and weaken their respect for their own Government, rather than to force them, by senseless slander, to hate our institutions and love their own, whether with a view to a possible or probable state of war or a change of their constitution, vesting the power in the people and abolishing the royal prerogative. The press of England, by acting on this principle, exasperated the British people against the dynasty of Napoleon; and, to some considerable extent, disaffected the French to his prejudice. If history be philosophy teaching by example, let us profit by it.

It is high time that this Oregon controversy was forever settled and put at rest. Its continual agitation injuriously affects the currency and business of the country. Currency and commerce mutually act and react on each other. They are so sympathetic, and intimately and vitally connected, as to flourish and fade, rise and fall, together. Our actual currency is essentially paper or credit, and is made the gambling capital of the stockjobbers and brokers, the bulls and bears of Wall street; and those harpies on the public prosperity never lose the opportunity to blow hot and cold, up and down, and spread panic as often as our foreign relations, of serious adjustment, are mooted. For this cause, among others of graver import, it is the bounden duty of this Government now to bring this difficulty to a crisis, and give repose and stability to the business of the country, having constant regard to the just rights and honor of the nation. In my humble judgment the giving of this notice is the first step to be taken in the final, speedy, peaceful, honorable, and just settlement of this vexed question.

Now why do we want Oregon? It is a large country, extending some twelve and a half degrees north and south, and some seven hundred miles in breadth from east to west, with a salubrious climate and a fertile soil. It is the key of the Pacific. It will command the trade of the isles of the Pacific, of the East, and of China. We want Oregon, because it is contiguous to the United States; to establish there the institutions of freedom; to plant there the tree of liberty; to erect there our standard; and to wave there the star-spangled banner upon the highest and most remote boundaries of that territory, in honor of those institutions consecrated by the blood of the Revolution, and founded by our Washington, our Franklin, our Jefferson, and our Adams. We want it, sir, *because it is ours*; because the *British want it*; because it will make a happy home for unborn millions who are to emigrate from these States to the west of the Rocky mountains; we want it because our people have gone there, wish to go there, and will go there, to make permanent settlements, to establish homes for themselves and their posterity forever.

I repeat, sir, unless we give this notice and follow up the giving this notice, by the extension of our laws and protection over our settlers in Oregon, that they never will go north of the Columbia river to settle; that the whole territory north of the Columbia is certain, in the end, to fall into the hands of Great Britain. She now has Fort Vancouver, Fort George, and various other forts located on the Columbia, with her settlements about them; and our citizens will not go

there. If we fail to carry out the recommendations of the Executive, which to me seem reasonable and just, our citizens, instead of bending their course to the northward of the Columbia river, will eventually go down to California, and make their settlement in the south; and thus will carry out that "mastely inactivity" policy to which I have adverted.

When I rose, Mr. Chairman, I did not expect to occupy the full time allowed me. I have briefly glanced at the leading considerations that have governed me and brought me to the conclusion I have attained, that we are bound—bound by the honor of this nation, and by that justice which is due to our settlers in Oregon—to give this notice; to unfetter ourselves, and to extend our laws and our jurisdiction over this people, that they may receive that encouragement which is necessary for the occupation and the peopling of this territory. It appears to me—and so I think the British Government will regard it—that if we *fail* to give this notice, and to pass those measures which are recommended to us, and which gentlemen say they will pass, that the British Government will regard it as an indication on the part of Congress, at least, that the territory south of 49° as well as north of 49°, is a matter for negotiation, for compromise, and for division. Now, is there any gentleman on this floor who is prepared to say that the territory south of 49° does not belong to us? And is there any one on this floor prepared to intimate to the Executive or to Great Britain that the territory south of that parallel is open for negotiation? I trust not; and, having submitted these views, I yield the floor.

APPENDIX.

Convention between the United States of America and Great Britain, signed at London, October 20, 1818.

ARTICLE 2. It is agreed that a line drawn from the most northwestern point of the Lake of the Woods, along the forty-ninth parallel of north latitude, or, if the said point shall not be in the forty-ninth parallel of north latitude, then that a line drawn from the said point due north or south, as the case may be, until the said line shall intersect the said parallel of north latitude, and from the point of such intersection due west along and with the said parallel, shall be the line of demarkation between the territories of the United States and those of his Britannic Majesty; and that the said line shall form the northern boundary of the said territories of the United States, and the southern boundary of the territories of his Britannic Majesty, from the Lake of the Woods to the Stony mountains.

ART. 3. It is agreed that any country that may be claimed by either party on the northwest coast of America, westward of the Stony mountains, shall, together with its harbors, bays, and creeks, and the navigation of all rivers within the same, be free and open for the term of ten years from the date of the signature of the present convention, to the vessels, citizens, and subjects of the two Powers; it being well understood that this agreement is not to be construed to the prejudice of any claim which either of the two high contracting parties may have to any part of the said country, nor shall it be taken to affect the claims of any other Power or State to any part of the said country; the only object of the high contracting parties, in that respect, being to prevent disputes and differences among themselves.

Convention between the United States and Great Britain, signed at London, August 6, 1827.

ARTICLE 1. All the provisions of the third article of the convention concluded between the United States of America and his Majesty the King of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, on the 20th of October, 1818, shall

be, and they are hereby, further indefinitely extended and continued in force, in the same manner as if all the provisions of the said article were herein specifically recited.

ART. 2. It shall be competent, however, to either of the contracting parties, in case either should think fit, at any time after the 20th October, 1828, on giving due notice of twelve months to the other contracting party, to annul and abrogate this convention; and it shall, in such case, be ac-

cordingly entirely annulled and abrogated, after the expiration of the said term of notice.

ART. 3. Nothing contained in this convention, or in the third article of the convention of the 20th October, 1818, hereby continued in force, shall be construed to impair, or in any manner affect, the claims which either of the contracting parties may have to any part of the country westward of the Stony or Rocky mountains.

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